



News Release

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

NUMBER:
FOR RELEASE:
<http://www.dhs.ca.gov>

06-66
IMMEDIATE

DATE: August 30, 2006
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STATE PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER URGES PARENTS TO TAKE SIMPLE STEPS TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM HEAD LICE

SACRAMENTO – With children back in school, State Public Health Officer Dr. Mark Horton today highlighted simple steps parents can take to protect their children from head lice.

"Head lice continue to be a problem wherever young children play together," Horton said. "Head lice can be transmitted from an infested child to other children through hair-to-hair contact. Sharing beds, pillows, hats, clothing, combs, brushes, barrettes, helmets, scarves, head phones and other personal items should be avoided."

Head lice are wingless insects about one-eighth of an inch long and grayish white or light brown that do not jump or fly and do not transmit disease. Lice glue their eggs or nits to hair so that the nits do not get brushed off. People are the only known hosts. Most schools will not allow children to attend if they have evidence of head lice or nits. It takes eight to 10 days for the nits to hatch and another nine or more days for the lice to become adults and lay eggs.

Horton advised parents who discover their child has head lice or has been in contact with another child with head lice to do the following:

- Thoroughly inspect the child's hair close to the scalp, at the neckline and behind the ears. Also, inspect the hair of other family members.
- If head lice are found, use an over-the-counter head lice control product. The most common active ingredient is permethrin, which is currently in Nix® cream rinse formula. Follow the label directions carefully and do not exceed the recommended treatment without consulting a physician.
- Remove all lice and nits daily with a nit or flea comb. This step is an important lice control measure. Nit combs are available at pharmacies.

- Remove any nits that cannot be combed out by either picking them out or by snipping the hair between the scalp and where the eggs are attached.
- Soak combs, brushes, hair bands and barrettes in rubbing alcohol or Lysol® for one hour or boil for five minutes.

If the head lice problem persists, it may be because the label directions were not followed, lice re-infested the scalp, the lice were not affected by the treatment or because the child had a hair condition, not lice.

If two treatments of over-the-counter products do not work, Horton advised parents to talk to a doctor about a prescription for Ovide®. Products such as enzyme-based compounds, vinegar, olive oil, mayonnaise, margarine or tea tree oil are not effective in killing lice.

Head lice control products containing the pesticide Lindane are prohibited from sale in California. Lindane is less effective and can be more harmful to the child.

A new brochure, "A Parent's Guide to Head Lice," and the "Guidelines on Head Lice Prevention and Control for School Districts and Child Care Facilities, 2006" are on the California Department of Health Services' Web site at <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/dcdc/disb/disbindex.htm>. The brochure is also available in Spanish. Consumers can obtain further information by contacting their local health department.